



AN ASSOCIATION OF
MONTANA HEALTH
CARE PROVIDERS

January 22, 2013

Chairman Roy Hollandsworth
Appropriations Subcommittee on Education
Montana State Capitol

Chairman Hollandsworth,

I am writing on behalf of MHA in support of the health care workforce development funding for the university system. MHA is an association that represents hospitals, physicians, long-term care providers, home health agencies and hospices.

MHA and its 75 member organizations urge your support for three specific proposals:

- \$200,000 in additional state funding for Montana's expanding primary care residency training programs for physicians,
- Expansion of the WWAMI program to allow 10 additional Montana students to obtain their medical education through this unique opportunity, and
- Increased funding for health profession training programs.

The most critical need in our state is for primary care providers – physicians and mid-level practitioners – who can serve our state's aging population and rural communities. Additional residency program funding and more slots in the WWAMI program are essential to meeting this goal.

Residency Programs. Residency programs are a highly effective tool for recruiting and retaining physicians to our state, as evidenced by the fact that roughly 70 percent of the graduates of the Family Practice Residency Program in Billings stayed in Montana to practice permanently.

To date, we have one program in Billings that has provided training opportunities for six – eight students since the mid-1990's. In the past two years, two new programs have been proposed: an additional family practice residency in northwest Montana and an internal medicine program in Billings. These new programs mean that four times as many graduates will be able to do their residency in the state.

Since its inception, residency training in the state has been a public-private partnership between the state and federal governments – through the Medicare program – and hospitals. The state's share has been \$326,000 for a number of years. With the increase in the number of residents in the state, we urge your support for a small increase -- \$200,000 per year – in state support.

WWAMI Slots. Each year, Montana's WWAMI program turns away qualified applicants because they don't have enough slots. This proposal will allow us to meet some of the demand for medical education.

It is also important to note that Montana WWAMI officials have worked diligently to seek students who want to return to the state to practice medicine, to expand the number of clinical rotation positions in Montana and to provide additional opportunities for WWAMI students to work in our state.

The Health Care Workforce. Health care is the largest private sector employer in the state and jobs in health care are growing unlike almost any other sector in the state's economy. In addition, these jobs are highly-paid, highly-skilled positions; the kinds of jobs that form the economic foundation of many communities.

Hospitals alone employ over 22,200 persons. As these individuals spend their salaries, an additional 17,000 jobs are generated.

Despite the large number of health care personnel working in Montana, the demand for health care professionals continues to grow and will continue to grow as our population and our health care workers age.

Today 45 percent of Montana physicians are 55 or older – one of the oldest physician groups in the nation. The average age of an RN in Montana is 44.5.

In Montana, more than 300,000 residents live in counties with fewer primary care physicians than the national average. Montana has 11 counties without any physicians and there are 39 counties below the national average physician-to-patient ratio for primary care.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects there will be nearly 1,500 RNs needed in Montana by 2018. And just to keep pace with current demand and retirements we need to increase the number of occupational therapists, respiratory therapists, physical therapists, pharmacists, med techs, and clinic laboratory techs from approximately 3,700 to 5,046 by 2018.

Finally, MHA periodically surveys its members to check the number of health professional worker vacancies. Over the past two years we have consistently found that on any given day there are over 400 job openings in hospitals across the state.

For these reasons I am writing to you in support of the university system; through its 4-year and 2-year campuses it provides a number of opportunities for Montanans to train in the health professions.

History tells us that these Montanans, trained in our university system, are more likely to stay and work in our state. So, in our view, it makes great sense to focus the university system's efforts on training students for good-paying jobs available in our state.

MHA and our member organizations have a long-term collaborative relationship with the Commissioner's office and the university system to develop and expand health professions education programs at both the 2-year and 4-year units.

Together we have developed a number of programs that meet our workforce needs and provide solid careers for Montana's students. We look forward to working even more closely in the future.

We recognize that every year is a tough year to seek more funding, but do ask that when you set your priorities for spending education dollars, you consider that we have a ready market for health care professionals in our state, that demand for these professionals is going to grow in the future and that health care jobs are among the highest-paying in the state.

In our view, funding for health care workforce training – whether for training physicians, nurses, physical therapists or technicians – should be one of your highest priorities for the university system budget.

On behalf of MHA and its members I would like to thank you for your continued interest in educating the future health care work force right here at home.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Dick Brown". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dick Brown
President